



Success insight panels

Accelerating growth in the digital era

18 November 2026

11:00–12:00 | Room TBC

Cross-border collaboration and market expansion

20 November 2026

10:00–11:00 | Room TBC

Background and regional context

Across the Arab region, entrepreneurship is entering a new chapter in which ambitious ideas are finding new ways to grow, scale and expand beyond borders. A good idea is only the beginning. Turning it into a successful business and then taking it to new markets requires the right combination of innovation, technology, skills, partnerships and opportunity. The startup ecosystem showed strong momentum, with startups in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region raising \$2.1 billion across 334 transactions in the first half of 2025, a 134% increase from the same period in 2024.¹ In the first half of 2026, startups raised \$1.7 billion across 242 funding rounds,² an 18% decline reflecting a more selective investment environment focused on businesses with stronger growth and scaling potential.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the clearest drivers of this momentum. In 2025, AI accounted for 22% of all venture capital funding and 29% of deals, signalling that it is becoming an important part of the innovation and investment landscape.³

Across the Arab region, entrepreneurs are turning technology, innovation and changing consumer needs into businesses that create value and open new possibilities. Some are using AI to solve problems, improve their operations or develop new products; others are challenging traditional business models, reaching underserved communities or addressing some of the region's most pressing needs. What connects these different journeys is not a particular technology or formula for success, but the courage to see an opportunity, the ability to act on it and the determination to turn an idea into sustainable growth.

Today, borders matter less than ever in determining where a business can operate. Digital platforms, e-commerce, remote services and cross-border partnerships enable companies to reach customers, suppliers, investors and expertise far beyond their domestic markets. For small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and startups, international expansion no longer necessarily begins with establishing a physical presence abroad. It can start with a first export order, an online customer, a strategic partnership or participation in a regional value chain.

Policy frameworks are also adapting. In 2023, the Ministry of Planning in Iraq, in collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), launched a roadmap for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) covering financing, e-commerce, digital payments and access to growth opportunities.⁴ These priorities reflect the growing role of digital transformation in enabling businesses to innovate and grow.

Over the past two decades, the Arab region has witnessed a growing number of technology success stories. In 2009, Yahoo acquired Maktoob, a company founded in Jordan, for \$164 million, attracted by its strong position among Arabic-speaking internet users. This marked one of the region's first major technology exits.⁵

In 2017, Amazon acquired Souq.com for approximately \$580 million, after the company had built a strong regional customer base in e-commerce.⁶

In 2019, Careem, founded in Dubai in 2012, agreed to be acquired by Uber for \$3.1 billion. The acquisition was completed in 2020, with Careem continuing to operate under its own brand.⁷

In Iraq, **Miswag** grew from a Baghdad-based startup into one of the country's leading online retail platforms. By combining technology, logistics and digital commerce, the company helped connect local and international brands with customers across Iraq, while using automation to address market-specific challenges.

The region has also begun producing success stories in more specialized technology fields. InstaDeep, founded in Tunisia in 2014, grew from an AI startup into a global company serving clients across several industries. After raising \$100 million in a Series B round in 2022, the company was acquired by BioNTech in 2023, in a deal valued at approximately €500 million for the remaining shares.⁸

Taken together, these stories show how the region's technology ecosystem has evolved from early internet businesses to regional digital platforms, multi-market companies and specialized AI ventures. They also highlight the different paths through which regional companies reach global markets: building a strong position in local or underserved markets, scaling across the region, specializing in advanced technologies or attracting global investors and acquirers. These real-world examples provide a solid foundation for discussing what helps businesses grow, attract investment and expand beyond their home markets.

Objectives

- Showcase real examples of SME and startup growth and success, highlighting the business choices, innovations, technologies, partnerships and other factors that supported their development.
- Explore how successful businesses expand beyond their home markets, including through exports, e-commerce, partnerships, regional networks and value chains.
- Draw practical lessons for entrepreneurs, SMEs and startups on what can support sustainable growth, market expansion and competitiveness.

Participants

SMEs, startups, entrepreneurs and business leaders from across the Arab region, representing different sectors, markets and stages of growth.

Agenda

Day 1: 18 November 2026

Time	Title	Session description	Speakers/Moderators
11:00–12:00	Accelerating growth in the digital era	This session examines the barriers that women, young people, and underserved groups face when starting a business, in areas such as entrepreneurship support programmes, business registration procedures, digital government services, the legal and regulatory environment, and taxation. The session also explores ways to simplify procedures and improve access to services and support.	Ahmed Kadhum, Chief Investments Officer, Qi Group Tareq Dalbah, Co-founder & CEO, Arab Therapy Abdel Malek Al-Mouzayen, Co-founder & CEO, BeeOrder Moderator: Omaima El Idrissi TV correspondent & presenter, Shams TV

Day 3: 20 November 2026

Time	Title	Session description	Speakers
10:00–11:00	Cross-border collaboration and market expansion	The session explores how SMEs and startups have expanded beyond their home markets. The discussion focuses on entering regional or international markets through exports, e-commerce, partnerships, networks and value chains, with speakers sharing how they adapted their products or services and navigated regulatory, financial and logistical challenges.	Semiha Abdullah Partnerships & Technical Cooperation Coordinator, SESRIC Shakir Ayad Founder & CEO, Orderii

Endnotes

1. Nesma Abdel Azim, [MENA startup investment hits \\$2.1 billion in H1 2025, up 134% YoY](#), WAMDA, 24 July 2025.
2. Nesma Abdel Azim, [MENA startups raise \\$1.7 billion in H1 2026 despite regional uncertainty](#), WAMDA, 13 July 2026.
3. MAGNiTT, [FY 2025 State of Venture Capital of AI in MENA](#), 2026.
4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Iraq, [Ministry of Planning, USAID, and UNDP Launch MSME Roadmap in Support of Private Sector Growth in Iraq](#), 26 June 2023.
5. Yahoo! Inc., [Annual Report](#), 2010.
6. Jon Russel, [Amazon completes its acquisition of Middle Eastern e-commerce firm Souq](#), TechCrunch, 3 July 2017.
7. Uber Investor, [Uber Completes Acquisition of Careem](#), 2 January 2020.
8. BioNTech, [BioNTech Completes Acquisition of InstaDeep](#), 31 July 2023.